

The Evolving Megatext of Fantasy

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The Evolving Megatext of Fantasy

The shadow of J.R.R. Tolkien looms over the fantasy genre. Many writers regard his work as a blueprint for world construction, discussing and expanding on his principles of 'subcreation' and incorporating many of the elements of his appendices to *The Return of the King* or the historical tone of *The Silmarillion* in their own world making research.

However, Tolkien's detailed world building also seeps into the stories of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, appearing in the text as exposition to convey the vast sense of scale of his narrative. For Tolkien, the journeys of each quest are opportunities to describe the landscape, its rich history and the geopolitics of Middle-Earth, an indulgence that Christine Brooke-Rose describes as "hypertrophic redundancy", in her book, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure Especially of the Fantastic* (1983).

As a theorist and writer, Professor Christine Brooke-Rose was experimental and a proponent of the essentiality of the text, looking at omission to demonstrate meaning in language. In her analysis of genres, she introduces us to the *megatext* (Brooke-Rose, 1983: 243); a blueprint-like concept where the world values of a book are explained.

Brooke-Rose begins her study of this with J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1951). She acknowledges the popularity and effect of the work as a preeminent fantasy quest and examines it from a structuralist viewpoint, breaking down the components into likened elements; the quest narrative itself being a common trope as are the defined roles of characters as plot functions or representation functions demonstrating the unity of peoples in opposition to Middle-Earth's villain.

Brooke-Rose builds her argument from the work of Roland Barthes and his referential code (Barthes, *S/Z*: 205-206). This is a study in familiarity as the narrative uses our own knowledge and experience of parallel works as a backdrop to its story. The sedentary life experience generated is recognised by us and used as an anchor for the narrative. It is the shared conceptual memory of related forms to the story being told.

It is in *the appeal to memory* (Barthes, *S/Z*: 205-206) that we find a starting point to the concept of the megatext, although not perhaps as Brooke-Rose intended at the time she wrote her book. Initially she uses the term to describe the expositional back story that is woven into Tolkien's work.

[The Lord of the Rings] like SF but more so, is particularly interesting in that there is such a megatext, not pre-existent but entirely invented, yet treated with the utmost seriousness and in great detail, thus destroying the element of recognition and hence readability which this feature provides in the realistic novel and causing on the contrary a plethora of information and the collapse of the referential code...

(Brooke-Rose, 1983: 243).

The conclusion of this analysis is difficult to digest when other critics have drawn comparisons of the Shire, to the pre-industrialised agricultural idylls of England and likened the Dead Marshes to the battlefields of the First World War. Despite the fact that Tolkien himself famously stated these

comparisons were not intentional allegory, a writer's experiences do serve them when they seek to describe particularly vivid scenes in their work.

Writing in *Wizardry and Wild Romance* (2004), author Michael Moorcock, calls Tolkien's descriptive style 'Epic Pooh' showing a comparison to A. A. Milne.

The sort of prose most often identified with "high" fantasy is the prose of the nursery room. It is a lullaby, it is meant to soothe and console. It is mouth-music. It is frequently enjoyed not for its tensions but for its lack of tensions. It coddles, it makes friends with you; it tells you comforting lies. It is soft.

(Moorcock, 2004: 123).

Moorcock's criticism, first published by the British Fantasy society in 1978, focuses on the familiarity of Tolkien's descriptive writing, suggesting it is an evocation of children's stories and the simplified world of the fairy tale. In that sense, the tone conveys the content, initially invoking images of idyllic countryside and later, reducing treks across mountain ranges to the same kind of priorities we might have; where to make camp, what to eat, etc. The Hobbit viewpoint is somewhat childlike in itself, when in many scenes, Frodo, Merry, Pippin, and to some extent, Bilbo and Sam, are positioned as children amongst grown ups, being protected and looked after by Gandalf, Aragorn, and others. We have all been children, so this position is something we understand.

The root of Moorcock's criticism is easier to understand when he begins his review of *The Broken Sword* by Poul Anderson:

Reading it as a boy, Anderson's book, impressed me so powerfully that I couldn't then enjoy Tolkien's. Both stories involved magical artefacts of great power whose possession inclined the users to drastic evil. Both described Faery as a world of ancient, pre-human races no longer as powerful as they were... Nevertheless I couldn't take Tolkien seriously...

(Moorcock, 2004: 155).

Whilst Moorcock does return to his aforementioned critique of writing as a reason for this, the comparison to *The Broken Sword* introduces another element. Anderson's tale is written as if it might be an actual myth of the Dark Ages, to sit alongside Beowulf and other stories of the time. Tolkien's story is not written this way and requires the reader to immediately accept the world of Middle-Earth, along with its vast invented history.

Reading *The Lord of the Rings* now, is a different experience to reading it in the 1950s when Moorcock read it and is also a different experience to when Christine Brooke-Rose critiqued the books in the 1980s. The genre of fantasy has become part of popular culture, and Middle-Earth is a wholly familiar world to us and is a clear appeal to memory and to the common body of knowledge (Barthes, *S/Z*: 205-206) which in part, contradicts Brooke-Rose's assertion of a collapsed referential code (Brooke Rose, 1983: 247). However, there is an expositional weight as she suggests, to seemingly define many of the story concepts.

Brooke-Rose applies her criticism to the inclusion of the appendices in *The Lord of the Rings* (1951).

Apart from the 'hypertrophic' redundancy in the text itself, the recapitulations and repetitions, there are long appendices, not only on the history and genealogy but on the language of elves, dwarves, wizards and other powers, together with their philological development, appendices which though ostensibly given to create belief in the 'reality' of these societies, in fact and even frankly playfully reflect the author's private professional interest in this particular slice of knowledge, rather than narrative necessity, since all of the examples of runic and other messages inside the narrative are both given in the original and translated. Nor are the histories and genealogies in the least necessary to the narrative, but they have given infantile happiness to the Tolkien clubs and societies, whose members apparently write to each other in Elvish.

(Brooke-Rose, 1983: 247).

The prose is thick and littered with self-referentiality for a reason which Brooke-Rose describes as 'infantile happiness'. Her argument is that this is because of the author's 'professional interest' and she infers that it has no purpose. However, this jams together many things under one criticism and does not really examine their function or effect (Brooke-Rose, 1983: 247).

Brooke-Rose indicates Tolkien's megatext is wholly unique to the author's invention, but this does not appear to be the case. To suggest Tolkien's work doesn't use the familiar and generate recognition is denying many of its themes; the homely pre-industrialised echo of the Shire, the Anglo-Celtic resonance of the Rohrimm (Tolkien, 1995: 450) and the good/evil binary of characters. Granted, Tolkien does reinvent contexts, but Middle Earth is made familiar by so many of its aspects, not least its name. Much as some are not in the immediate mind of the reader/viewer they are as much a part of the background story memory as any other work of fiction, but are applied to the adopted form.

In Tolkien's hands, the Elf takes on a new image from its Norse origins with invented language and image transposed into a new mythology. Our own language is also accidentally re-written with the word "Dwarves" becoming an accepted plural form. In Middle-Earth, we have many familiar tropes retranslated into a new fantasy world, although not completely, as noted in *The Hobbit* (1975):

I suppose hobbits need some description nowadays, since they have become rare and shy of the Big People, as they call us. They are (or were) a little people, about half our height, and smaller than the bearded dwarves. Hobbits have no beards. There is little or no magic about them, except the ordinary everyday sort which helps them to disappear quietly and quickly when large stupid folk like you and me come blundering along, making a noise like elephants which they can hear a mile off.

(Tolkien, 1975: 14).

This quote is one of very few that through authorial voice anchors Tolkien's texts to our world and is often overlooked as it cuts against the accepted thinking of the work as being purely escapist. In fact, the escape is a journey rather than immediate choice and if there is a unique parallel story, we are gradually led towards it, or away from what we accept and know.

Brooke-Rose's explanation of her term makes no distinction between qualities of a reference text for a singular fictional world or one for a genre. Damian Broderick in *Reading by Starlight* (1995) clarifies the matter:

The element in sf which Brooke-Rose appears to have slighted, at severe cost to her analysis, is the extensive generic mega-text built up over fifty years, even a century, of mutually imbricated sf texts. When novelties like hyper-space and cyberspace, memex and AI (Artificial Intelligence), nanotech and plug-in personality agents are very quickly taken up as the common property of a number of independent stories and authors, we have the beginnings of a new mega-text.

(Broderick, 1995: 59).

For Brooke-Rose to suggest redundancy in the writing is to imply there is no purpose to the additions of appendices and expository reference. It is true the additional material is not essential, but it still has a function. The weave within the story narrative is primarily designed to project depth. Tolkien builds layers, using invented terminology so that you might want to learn more and through the appendices, inviting you to do so. There is no essentiality here and that indeed is part of the attraction, instead there is intrigue, curiosity and empowerment. Readers may choose to engage on a number of levels, with the most enthused, delving into the depths of the final book's additions and moving on to *The Silmarillion* (1979) for more invented mythological context. By layering the narrative of the work, Tolkien creates layers of engagement and as an unintended by-product, creates layers of community (through knowledge) amongst fans.

The concept of a genre megatext is useful when trying to understand the development of the fantasy genre since the 1980s. Referential elements appeal to the commonalities that are intrinsic to the preferences of the consumer of the content. Individuals may enjoy fantasy or science fiction stories, they may enjoy a particular fantasy or science fiction franchise, or they may enjoy a particular type of output (novel, film, etc). We may want to find out what happened to a particular character, learn about the next events in a fictional world's history, etc.

Tolkien's Middle-Earth and its hypertrophic redundancy frames particular aspects of popular fantasy, drawing an archetypal blueprint over many key elements. For example, the referential image of Tolkien's Elf, Orc, Troll and Goblin informs any story that invokes the same, fulfilling the concept that Brooke-Rose identified when applying Barthes' writing on the referential code to this concept in literature.

The rise of roleplaying games, such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (1977), provides vast catalogues of generic creatures drawn from their folk tale roots and washed clean so they might appear in any new fantasy world. As they are used in an array of different fictions, these become archetypes to contradict or reinforce. At times, the latter proves the easier course, particularly when the reader is more willing to accept it and so monsters transplanted from their origins retain many of the other attributes that defined them.

This matter extends from older textual forms into computer games in part by related experience of designers who are also following Barthes' dictum.

In *Reading by Starlight* (1995), Damien Broderick builds on Barthes' code and Brooke-Rose's megatext, applying these ideas to gaming:

And of course the extension of sf and fantasy mega-texts into board and computer gaming has developed into a series of virtual cults, whose mega-texts, in a continuous state of communal expansion, are far more ornate than those once-and-for-all histories and genealogies which, in Brooke-Rose's tart words, 'have given much infantile happiness to the Tolkien clubs and societies whose members apparently write to each other in Elvish' (ibid.,p.247).

(Broderick, 1995: 59).

The megatext of the fantasy genre has evolved greatly in the last twenty years. Each medium draws from a similar base, but the diversification of available mediums to the individual means a diversification of the referential code. The advent of multiplayer online roleplaying games has broadened the access and appeal of quests, particularly as adventure parties can be drawn together from across the world. The dominant texts of the fantasy genre, in terms of popularity, have become films and games. The sophistication of these mediums develops as they age, and the designers of games apply their formative experiences to the new things they create.

I wrote about this in 2016, in my BFS Journal paper, *Fantasy and the Referential Language* (2016).

All writers are readers and as such, our experience of our genre colours how we write. The priorities of games encourage a different form of abstraction. Players are driven towards tests, puzzles and achievements, with narrative built as reward. Part of the toolkit is a set of shortcut phrases to overcome the grind. Readers of fantasy all know 'food restores health' and 'spell cards' are limited. In many, the detail of combat is especially prized. Many of these genre-isms are poured into related fiction as we gamers try our hand at stories.

(Stroud, 2016: 79).

In, *The Known and The Unknown: The Iconography of Science Fiction* (1979), Gary K. Wolfe identifies several of the main evolving megatextual concepts of the science fiction genre, such as the spaceship and the robot, which are utilised and interpreted in different ways by many science fiction texts.

Science Fiction deliberately uses the terms and structures of scientific thought to create mythic patterns, and the belief that underlies these patterns is a belief not so much in supernatural beings as in the almost supernatural power of rationality itself.

(Wolfe, 1979: 6).

The mythic quality that Wolfe identifies as being a part of these icons is an essential component of science fiction's appeal to its audience. The continual speculation on the future based on our knowledge of our present and the possible technologies we may invent and discover is an accepted part of the genre's restless and imaginative nature. Each advance in modern society makes room for this reinterpretation as we learn more and achieve more, rendering previous speculations obsolete.

Broderick expands Wolfe's ideas to include other genres (Broderick, 1995: 61), explaining that each genre has elements with 'iconic weight', but that they can have different roles, properties and functions. However, the mythic quality is something that the two genres both use, particularly when such icons are important plot devices, like Tolkien's use of the Ring, or Smaug the Dragon.

So, genre of fantasy also has evolving icons when applied across texts within its sphere, but unlike science fiction, these are not reinterpretations of the future. Instead, they can be reinterpretations of our fragmented past, with fiction filling in or replacing aspects of missing factual detail.

In the journal, *Science Fiction Studies* #14 Volume 5 Part 1 (1978), Darko Suvin describes his concept of novums:

...a fictional novelty (novum, innovation) validated both by being continuous with a body of already existing cognitions and by being a "mental experiment" based on cognitive logic.

(Suvin, 1978).

Suvin qualifies his definition when applied to fantasy, stating that a novum is not 'fiction whose narrative logic is determined by a novelty strange to the author's empirical reality' (Suvin, 1978) and therefore, according to his definition magical objects in fantasy are not a novum.

However, there is substantial similarity in the application of futuristic technology in science fiction to the application of magical objects in the genre of fantasy. Both can be used to define and shape the everyday lives of the people that make use of them in the narrative, thereby altering the values of their culture and society.

Additionally, when considering the evolving megatext of the Fantasy genre and the use of archetypes, icons and other common themes, such as the quest story, magic, etc. there is a body of referential material that lends itself to be an imaginative and escapist substitution for the reader and writer's empirical reality. So, instead of communicating through a mediation of the real world, there is a level of communication achieved through the established tropes of the genre.

For example, the use of portals is at the heart of my story *Dreams of Chaos* (2016) and describes the reality of the wider fictional world; affecting the nature of societies, cultures and individual lives. The device is a familiar trope with the genre and its megatext, so not strange as a fictional contrivance, in itself. The portals have a function within the story, but are not based on a shared logic, rather they are based in part, on a rejection of that logic in their process, but an acceptance of it in their function – i.e. we know what they do, but somewhere in the explanation of how they do it, there is a use of magic or another mythical or wondrous quality that is part of the strangeness Suvin identified.

In *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), Farrah Mendelsohn also identifies some of the functions of portals within the genre, but instead, uses them to create a frame of reference to group fantasy texts into categories based on usage of different fantastical elements.

In this book, I argue that there are essentially four categories within the fantastic: the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusive and the liminal. These categories are determined by the means by which the fantastic enters the fictional world.

(Mendelsohn, 2008: xiv).

This fusion of an object and a structure into one category of narrative is somewhat problematic, but Mendelsohn does address this in her definition of the category.

In both portal and quest fantasies, a character leaves her familiar surroundings and passes into an unknown place. Although portal fantasies do not have to be quest fantasies the overwhelming majority are, and the rhetorical position taken by the author/narrator is consistent.

(Mendelsohn, 2008: 1).

To my mind, whilst Mendelsohn's intention is much better focused by looking at functions of the fantastic, in some ways, this is re-treading the ground of structuralism espoused by writers like Christopher Booker in *Seven Basic Plots* (2006), which in itself is a culmination of structural ideologies, and applying it specifically to catalogue a genre. The danger of using such frames of reference comes when the frames appear to get in the way of our analysis and we find ourselves engaged in a confirmation bias process. The analysis of common functions identified here could be restricted by the categorisation and by removing the latter, we can spend more time looking at applications of the former, moving closer to a set of common icons, similar to those identified by Wolfe.

My purpose in looking at the megatext is not to border writing by categorised restriction, but to identify the legacies that interconnect the texts of the genre and thereby create an experiential familiarity, related to Barthes code, and Brooke-Rose's concept. From studying these legacies, it is clear that a commonality of objects, archetypes, themes, functions and tropes do arise, and that these are comparable to Suvin's novums, but outcast by his 'empirical reality' dictum. So, it is likely we need new terminology to describe this occurrence in fantasy literature. In his article for SFSignal, John Stevens goes some way to suggesting this:

I believe that we can also establish linkages to the real world in crafting a novum of the fantastikal. It requires putting more emphasis on that elementary dialectic and considering how our imaginations take in the particular sort of information that the fantastikal novum communicates to us.

(Stevens, 2011).

Stevens' article and its follow up quotes Wolfe from his later work, *Evaporating Genres* (2011). Stevens makes a case for 'what we recognize as empirically impossible' as being a novum of fantasy. However, Wolfe does sound a cautionary note:

If the delineation of the cognitive element in science fiction has been one of the strengths of criticism in that field, it is a fallacy to assume that fantasy employs the same cognitive principle in reverse – that is if science fiction deals with what we recognize as empirically possible, then fantasy must be what we recognize as empirically impossible. Such an approach ignores the strong affective element that accompanies and sometimes overpowers the cognitive in fantasy, and it fails to account for the ways in which fantasy narratives are carried forward.

However, Wolfe's assertion does not leave us at the end of the road. It is clear that some of the means by which we connect with these 'novum-likes' are through our recognition of them. So, the shape of a magical sword, or the tattered remains of an undead warrior's physical form are part of their identity to us, as might be the magical spells a wizard uses to solve the problems they encounter, in that often, we understand those problems and are only asked to reach imaginatively when picturing the solution.

Another part of fantasy's novum-like devices are their mythical and unmeasured natures. It is these that provoke our interest and encourage imaginative speculation amongst fantasy readers. Where such objects and characters, like Sauron's ring, or the Ringwraiths that seek it, remain imprecisely defined, their potential can be measured by the reader within the context of the story, or in another narrative context created solely by the reader.

In conclusion, in identifying and interpreting fantasy's megatext, we are able to discuss the building and evolving qualities of the texts written in the genre, identifying ways in which these texts relate to each other, without trying to define them in categories or boxes that can be disputed or do not best encapsulate their narratives. In addition to this, it is clear to me that the presence and importance of 'novum-like' devices within fantasy have become more prominent since Suvin defined their qualities in Science Fiction owing to the greater diffusion and take up of published fantasy across many different mediums, with the rise of games, television and films as well as the continuing popularity of books. The 'empirical reality' dictum is still valid, but only to determine the different quality of these devices in their respective genres, not to state they do not exist, or perform similar functions. This, in a way, returns us to Clarke's third law, first published in 1962:

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

(Clarke, 2000).

There is a need to name and conceptualise the qualities of the novum-like device in this genre. However, I think that might be a subject for another day.

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